

By Bill Lambrecht, St. Louis Post-Dispatch

WASHINGTON — Missouri Rep. Russ Carnahan dreams of "green" buildings — schools and offices made energy efficient by thousands of people given jobs.

Rep. William Lacy Clay, D-St. Louis, sees the opportunity to begin fixing the health care system with a new system of electronic health records, exactly what President-elect Barack Obama has championed.

Meanwhile, Rep. Jerry Costello, D-Belleville, believes in fixing the nation's infrastructure, using American-made steel instead of importing it from .

Beyond a hastened schedule of roads and bridges, members of Congress from the region want the economic recovery legislation taking shape over the holidays packed with projects that make significant investments in changing how Americans live and do business.

The Obama transition team has signaled that the stimulus package the new president wants must be heavy on routine repairs, the "shovel-ready" projects that can put the nation quickly on track to reaching Obama's goal of 3 million new jobs over the next two years. Obama says he wants to sign the legislation soon after his Jan. 20 inauguration.

Missouri Department of Transportation officials already have prepared their list of 34 projects that could be awarded in six months, more than \$500 million in highway and bridge construction. The largest would be the plan in west St. Louis County to reconstruct Highway 141 from Highway 340 to St. Luke's Hospital Drive.

While members of Congress are on break, many of their aides are back in Washington crafting a mammoth stimulus package that could end up totaling over \$800 billion, congressional aides say.

The spending frenzy may well be needed amid the worsening economic forecasts. Nonetheless, congressional leaders probably face the task of reining in the far-flung proposals by members.

Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., who has foresworn "earmarking" spending projects to unrelated legislation, argues for prudence in the haste to appropriate.

McCaskill said in a statement that she feared the bill "will get stuffed with ridiculous projects that won't create jobs. This should be all about jobs, jobs, jobs, and not a massive spending bill all done on a credit card."

Despite her worries, McCaskill and three other senators sent a letter to congressional leaders asking to include more than \$25 billion in water and sewer projects.

Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mo., who has taken heat from advocacy groups for his penchant for earmarking, said that Congress needed to be "reasonable" in how it proceeded. In Bond's calculations, it would be reasonable for the recovery package to build and expand community health centers across the country.

"I believe there ought to be projects that are of significance," Bond said. "We've got road needs that the Missouri Department of Transportation has laid out. There are needs for (river) locks on the Mississippi, airport needs, sewer and water needs. These are things that I think would be helpful."

GREEN JOBS, NEW HEALTH RECORDS

Like most everyone else in Congress, Carnahan, D-St. Louis, is compiling wish lists for new appropriations that nationally could exceed the cost of the interstate highway system and the race to the moon combined.

"There's a silver lining in these big clouds — an opportunity to do some big things for a change," he said.

Carnahan believes that he and Obama are on the same page when it comes to separate cornerstones of the incoming president's stimulus design — energy and infrastructure. And as co-chairman of the Congressional High-Performance Building Caucus, Carnahan is pressing for provisions in the package to require green building principles in new construction along with assistance in retrofitting current schools, offices and many

homes.

So-called high-performance buildings rely heavily on recycled materials while conserving water as well as energy with an eye toward historic preservation.

In a Dec. 19 letter, Carnahan reminded leaders in Congress that buildings consume 70 percent of the nation's electricity and emit 39 percent of the carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas accelerating global warming.

Carnahan added in an interview that tens of thousands of construction jobs could be generated with programs for weatherization and environmentally sound business practices.

If Clay gets his wish, his name could be associated with the beginning of health care reform. Clay observed that Congress lacked the political will — and backing from the White House — to embark on the massive task of fixing the scattershot way health records are maintained.

The costs could be jaw-dropping: more than \$200 billion in coming years to equip hospitals and doctors with an electronic health record system. But studies have predicted that the nation could rapidly recoup those in savings while boosting the quality of health care.

Obama vowed this month to pursue the information technology changes as part of the recovery package, which Clay took as an incentive to quickly reintroduce his proposal soon after

Congress convenes Jan. 6.

"We have the opportunity here to save thousands of lives and billions of dollars," Clay said.

Jessica Bock, Terry Hillig, Phil Sutin and Jake Wagman of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.

Copyright 2008 © The St. Louis Post Dispatch. All rights reserved.